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homemakers' chat

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U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

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Subject HERB MAGIC Information from food specialists and plant scientists of the
U. S. Department of Agriculture

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If you man in the service has eaten in some of the French restaurants or has taken a meal in a French home, chances are he's written you about the wonderful flavor of the food.

Like one corporal wrote his wife, "We were invited to this French home for dinner. It was a simple meal. Didn't have a lot of food....just soup, fish, a green salad and bread and butter sandwiches. No dessert. No coffee. But it was a wonderful meal. Every dish had a special and delicious flavor."

Now this corporal doesn't know it, but it's an open secret that French cooks get some of those special and delicious flavors by the skillful use of herbs. Yes, from time immemorial, cooks all over the world have used herbs for flavor and for accent. Seems funny, that here in America, many homemakers today aren't familiar with herb lore and cookery. Of course you know the flavors of mint, dill, sage and caraway. You've tasted them in commercial products. But are you acquainted with such herbs as rosemary, savory, sweet basil, thyme...or are they just fragrant names from your grandmother's cookbook?

A food specialist of the U. S. Department of Agriculture says that using herbs in cooking is not a science but an art. If you look upon cooking as an adventure and not just a daily chore...if you like to experiment...and if you put a lot of thought and imagination into your cooking, then you'll enjoy using herbs. And if you've never cooked with herbs, it'll take some time and experimenting for you to get just the blends you want. But keep trying. Eventually, you may even be

able to use herbs as skillfully as a French chef.

Best way to get acquainted with herbs is to raise some in your garden. Yes, I know the question that comes to your mind. You're asking, "An herb garden in the dead of winter?"

Surprisingly enough, winter's a good time to start herb gardening. On a very small scale of course and indoors in flower pots or in boxes. This way, you can raise enough herb plants right under your southwest window to provide flavor and add interest to many dishes.

Fresh herbs make even more delicious flavors than dry herbs. And you'll find that the growing herbs will fill your kitchen with fragrance.

If you're just starting out to learn herbs, don't go in for too many. Six or eight of the fine herbs will probably be all you'll have time to study at first. Herbs are great mixers. They gain in interest when you blend them harmoniously with other foods and with one another.

For your winter herb garden, plant scientists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommended the basil, thyme, rosemary, savory, sweet marjoram, rose geranium, chervil and chives.

I spoke of the southwest window. That's usually a good spot for growing plants because it's usually the sunniest window in the house. Herbs need plenty of sunshine. They need quite a bit of moisture too.

If you wish to plant your herbs in one box instead of in separate flower pots, here are some suggestions from the plant scientists. Get a box that's at least eight inches deep. Fill it first with a layer of broken stones. Spread them about an inch thick in the bottom. This will allow water to drain off. Then fill the rest of the box with a mixture of rich compost and good loam top soil. Use about half of each. Add a little commercial fertilizer...not more than two ounces of fertilizer to half a bushel of soil. Like all flower boxes and flower pots, your herb box will need to set in a metal tray or container to catch the water.

Get your first lessons in herb cookery by experimenting with just a few herbs at first. If you don't have much room, just grow one or two plants of each herb. And if you're using the herb box, set your plants about 8 inches apart so they'll get the full benefit of the sunshine. Don't crowd them. Keep an eye on them to see that they have plenty of moisture. You'll need to water your herb box at least twice a week.

The herb box will repay you with a sweet and pleasant aroma and with magic flavors in what were formerly ordinary foods. When the plants get large enough, cut a few sprigs each day. Try out combinations. Tie the sprigs into tiny bunches or boquest and drop them in your gravies and soups. Chop the herb leaves and sprinkle in your omelets and salads and dressings.

Here's a note of caution for beginners. Don't use herbs in every dish. Just use them for variety and accent. Don't disguise the original flavor. Use herbs sparingly. The aromatic oils are very strong. Use a light touch until you find the flavors and blends your family likes best.

You'll learn by experimenting. It takes study and practice to blend herbs just right for different purposes. One trick is to have a leading flavor and to combine from two to four less pronounced flavors with it.

But more of that when your herb garden is growing. Try out a small indoor herb garden this winter and next spring when you plan your family's Victory garden, chances are you'll insist on having more herbs. Like the French cooks, you'll say, "Herbs can work magic with foods."

